DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 306 FL 017 282

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TITLE Acceptance in the Academy for Business-Foreign Language Courses in the College or University Curriculum.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 10p.; In: Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions. Conference Proceedings; see FL 017 281.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiolingual Skills; *Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; College Second Language Programs; *Curriculum Development; Educational Objectives; Higher Education; *Languages for Special Purposes; Liberal Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Illinois College

ABSTRACT

Problems encountered by one small liberal arts college foreign language department in gaining and maintaining academic acceptance and support for business/foreign language courses are discussed. The initial challenge was to persuade the administration of the suitability of specialized business courses in a subject field (languages) viewed largely as a service area, at least in the lower level courses. The response offered was fivefold: (1) the language needs of graduates entering the business world are oral/aural as contrasted with the written language needs of the natural and social sciences; (2) the international business person needs more thorough cultural orientation; (3) international competition for business requires that graduates have better skills to deal with the interaction of language and cultures in their careers; (4) individuals' aural/oral skills must be of high quality to obtain employment; and (5) the audience for such courses in the college was found to be large. Other aspects of the program include constant monitoring of the international trade situation and upgrading of the curriculum, use of community resources, maintaining a balance between specific business applications of language and general proficiency, ongoing program evaluation and interdepartmental communication, and feedback from graduates and employers. It is noted that support and cooperation from the business department have been crucial to program success. (MSE)

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ACCEPTANCE IN THE ACADEMY FOR BUSINESS-FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES IN THE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

by
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Presented to the Sixth Annual Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions.
May 8, 1987 Ann Arbor, Michigan

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ACCEPTANCE IN THE ACADEMY FOR BUSINESS-FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES IN THE COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

I will attempt to outline some challenges commonly met by a foreign language department in the attempt to gain and maintain academic acceptance and support for Business/Foreign Language courses in the regular curriculum of the college or university. My remarks will come from a traditional liberal arts perspective, since my experience in this area has been as a German professor and Modern Languages Department chairman in a small liberal arts college. To give you a quick idea of the situation I will mention that Illinois College has just under 800 students with a foreign language requirement (intermediate level) for the B.A., but no foreign language for the B.S. (most majors have their choice). Currently we enroll about 200 students in all levels of the three languages offered (Spanish, French, German). Of the students enrolled in advanced classes, nearly all are involved in one of three combined-major or double-major programs: Education-Foreign Language, International Studies-Foreign Language, or Business-Foreign Language.

The Business-Foreign Language program is our youngest combined major, having been established six years ago. It has faced significant challenges within the college community from the time it was proposed through the present time, and the Modern Language Department continues to be kept on its collective toes in anticipating and meeting them. The program was challenged at the outset with the question of the suitability of specialized courses being offered in a subject field which is largely viewed as a service area anyway--at least in the lower level foreign language courses. If the Business-Foreign Language courses are to be instituted, we were asked, what area of need will they answer and how does that area differ from the specialized needs in other fields. In the hope that the answers we found may be of some help in your situation, I will briefly discuss five points at which we believe we have found at least partially persuasive answers.

I. The foreign language need of the graduate seeking entrance into the business world is decidedly of an oral-aural, i.e. functional-communicational nature. The job applicant for a position with a firm doing international business is likely first of all to be interviewed at least partially in his second language and then will most likely be expected to interact within the organization with native speakers who are superiors, colleagues, employees, and to represent the company before audiences or prospective markets whose native language must be addressed. This is a vastly different need from that of the natural or social scientist who is interested primarily in reading skills for research purposes or of the literary scholar who is interested in style, technique, nuance, etc. Teaching methods and devices aimed at oral-aural proficiency are quite distinct from those focused upon other objectives.

In our Business-Foreign Language classes which begin, enrollment permitting, at the intermediate level, we have instituted courses focusing very strongly on oral-aural proficiency with reading and writing as complementary but secondary goals. Classroom activities tend to be in the nature of dialog work, role playing, conversational problem posing and solving, construction of radio advertisments and television commercials. Tests and exams are usually of an oral nature and may involve the professor as interviewer or devil's advocate, but may also be a paired or group activity, either prepared or extemporaneous as to subject.

II. The international business person has a very definite need of a keen sensitivity to the culture-bound systems, institutions, and attitudes operating in the marketplace. Stories are commonplace which illustrate the disasters precipitated by a wrong word or phrase applied in what seems a very appropriate, even compelling context from an outsider's viewpoint. Any misunderstanding can be deadly from the point of view of the business person intent on closing a deal. The one who can operate successfully in the marketplace must be alert to the significance and power of the joke, the innuendo, the veiled threat, the implied proposal, and innumerable other nuances of language and communication. At least a beginning toward the development of such sensitivity can be nurtured in the interactions in the classroom.

III. As educators we must recognize and come to grips with the ever increasing pressure of economic necessity to operate in the international market. If it were ever appropriate to defend an isolationist position, that condition has certainly passed from the scene today. Even in western Illinois, sometimes labeled "Forgottonia" by the local politicians because of its supposed isolation and provinciality, it is now a commonplace for anyone with a known proficiency in another language to be bombarded with requests to serve as temporary interpreters for visiting business delegations, to conduct intensive language classes for American businessmen and workers being sent abroad, to translate and interpret instructions, operating manuals, company policy statements, in short, to bridge the gap between linguistic communities already united by economic realities.

Our graduates will face such challenges with increasing frequency and intensity in coming years. Even a career in "dad's hardware store" or the family farm will not provide insulation from the pressure of future one-world demands upon the individual. While it is true that we cannot prepare our students in detail for every situation, it is equally true that we can help them acquire the basic tools and techniques for dealing with the interaction of languages and cultures successfully in their careers as well as in their private lives.

IV. A further need is to make the business and trade skills which are being developed more marketable on an individual and personal level. It is remarkable how the awareness of such slight things as the minute difference between an English and a French, German, or Spanish keyboard on a typewriter or computer may mean the difference in landing a position or failing in the attempt. An appreciation of the necessity for the use of proper form of address and/or title in addressing and conversing with certain people is another example of an awareness necessary for interaction in the world of business. Much of the focus in this area lies in saturation of such points of knowledge so that proper usage becomes habitual and automatic--something that may not be at all needed for language users in other disciplines. Appropriate practice in the classroom will pay enormous dividends in career benefits.

V. In initiating any new program in the curriculum, the final question usually resolves itself into a matter of numbers. Just how many students will this proposed program affect and how much student demand can actually be demonstrated? We found ourselves on particularly strong ground here. The number of students in business administration and in accounting has dwarfed all other departments in our college for at least the past ten years and shows no signs of abatement in the near future. Each and every student in these programs was a potential enrollee in and beneficiary of a special Business-Foreign Language course. Demonstrating student demand for such courses was mainly a matter of getting the word out to the appropriate students that foreign language proficiency is a salable commodity, often a requirement on the marketplace of job and career. Even students who have avoided foreign language up to this point can become very interested when they realize that language skill may mean the difference in getting their preferred position or promotion or losing it.

We have found guidance materials of all kinds quite useful here, but two sorts of appeal have been particularly effective for us in recruiting and holding students in the programs: a compilation of current want-ads from St. Louis and Chicago newspapers in which language facility is required or preferred, and the personal testimony of alumni who have and are using language skills in their careers.

Once the Business-Foreign Language courses are in place in the curriculum, there are a number of critical areas which demand sustained attention in order to maintain and increase acceptance and esteem for the program. We have found these to be the most difficult set of tasks in the entire array. The most essential ingredients here are two in number: a nearly shameless degree of snoopiness in getting at the effectiveness and pertinence of the teaching-learning actually being done, and an extreme flexibility of approach in planning and teaching which allows for constant re-tooling as backgrounds of students and/or demands and requirements of the market situation shift. Once again I would like to touch upon five areas which we endeavor to keep uppermost in our conscious attention.

I. We endeavor to upgrade constantly the timeliness and relevance of teaching materials and methods to current and predictable future business practice. This involves first of all an intimate and first-hand knowledge of the local business situation. We have quite limited opportunities in the area of internships in our local situation, but the prospect is somewhat brighter in the area of part-time jobs for students willing to search them out. The areas of employment shift from year to year among industries such as book-binding, agricultural and earth-moving machinery, record pressing and tape recording, soybean oil products, plastics, and clothing production. We try to tailor our courses each semester to fit the immediate needs and curiosities of the students enrolled. We have been met with enthusiastic, even eager, cooperation from the side of the employers.

The other side of the coin is to keep abreast of the international situation and give the learning a broad enough scope to be sufficiently flexible for more universal application. We lean heavily upon our colleagues in the Business Department for assistance here, but we also try to keep an eye on corporate reports and forecasts, government bulletins, etc. Students themselves can be a big help, too, because they are particularly alert to things like new technology, trends and changes in products, etc.

II. The effective utilization of all community resources available is one of our goals. Volunteer and service organizations, as well as corporations and stores, even private individuals in business for themselves have been helpful in bringing together the needs of student world and business world on the plane of foreign language usage. Opportunities for international internship programs and short term employment have opened up through such diverse sources as a local watch-maker and jeweler, the local Rotary Club, an area road-building company, the national foreign Language teachers' professional associations, and the local hospital. Each situation has its own contribution to make for the improvement of the program as a whole as well as for the individual student. No resource of this kind should be considered too small or specialized to merit attention and inclusion within the program.

III. We try to maintain a balance between specific application of language to professional-business usage and a more general proficiency in the language. Actually, we have not found this balance difficult to maintain because business language and general usage are so complementary to one another. In fact, it may be more evident in foreign language practice than in the professional preparation class that the successful salesman is as interested in his customer (general conversational skills needed) as he is in his product and the sale (professional, technical language skills), or that the effective manager must be as interested in his employees' welfare as he is in their productivity. Nevertheless, it is necessary on the part of the teacher to maintain a vigilance in assuring the teaching and learning of both general language proficiency as well as specific career-oriented language skills. In keeping with this demand we have adopted the concepts espoused by ACTFL under the rubric of teaching for functional proficiency, which means that the success of our program is evaluated on the basis of the student's language proficiency in an ever increasing and deepening array of situations.

IV. An important part of the program we have developed is the in-college on-going evaluation process. Once again, we rely heavily upon the judgments and suggestions of our colleagues in the Business Department and try to keep all channels of communication open. We firmly believe that our language courses should both complement and supplement the professional preparation classes. Therefore we try to be constantly in step with the learning in these classes. By providing further drill and practice in the students' target languages we hope to reinforce and solidify their professional skills while increasing and deepening their language proficiency. One check on the success of our efforts, then, involves progress and success in the business courses. We encourage the students to carry their successes and problems, understandings and challenges across disciplinary boundaries. As language teachers we have found that our own inadequacies in technical matters and procedures in Business-Economics are more than compensated for by the benefits of the experience the student gets while explaining a matter in the foreign language.

Often the effort to translate the problem has brought with it the added insight for its solution, either on the part of the speaker himself or from a classmate. Still a further check on the teaching-learning effectiveness lies with the student himself. We try to have a climate free of threat and external pressure so that students can and will continually evaluate their progress toward functional proficiency in the language, and we also have a system of formal self-evaluation by each student twice each semester.

V. The final component of our evaluation effort involves the follow-up investigation after students have left college classes. We try to make this a double-pronged evaluation whenever possible, finding out how the graduate feels about his preparation for the language situations he has met on the job and finding out how the employer feels about the adequacy of our students in the positions they have filled. Whenever possible we try to make our evaluations in informal conversations rather than through forms and questionaires which have a notoriously low rate of return. Often it is possible to interview alumnus and employer together which makes for a more open, above-board atmosphere and clarifies the fact that it is the program and our teaching which are being evaluated, not the alum or his/her job efficiency.

Thus far, we have been generally pleased with the acceptance and esteem the Business-Foreign Language program has achieved in the college. Initial skepticism which we had to face in the beginning on the part of several colleagues who had memories of less than pleasant experiences with foreign language learning has generally come around to positive support. Enrollment in the classes has shown a gradual growth, though much less dramatic than we had hoped. Recruitment is perhaps our weakest area, but this is at least partially intentional. We have gone slowly on selling the program to large numbers of students because we wanted to be sure first that we were going to be able to develop high enough quality to justify their participation. We have firm support from the administration of the college and now expect to continue and expand the program for the foreseeable future.

Acceptance for such a special program within the academic community had to be achieved on several different levels. Proving the need for courses in Business-Foreign Language was really difficult only in one area. A significant portion of our college faculty and administration clings tenaciously to a conservative definition of liberal arts. From this perspective it is assumed a necessary thing to maintain vigilance against any element of narrow vocationalism slipping into the curriculum. We took the key word here to be narrow and we set about making sure that the language component in Business-Foreign Language classes would have and hold to goals at least as broad and deep as those objectives normally set for regular foreign language classes. We deemed it futile to try to hide or even minimize the importance of differences between such special courses and the regular general course, but when the differences can be demonstrated to involve the type of material learned only, and that neither quality nor quantity of learned material is sacrificed, such objection usually softens or disappears.

Another crucial factor in our experience was the gaining and holding of support and cooperation from the business department. We have worked hard to attain a situation in which the language department can rely upon testimonies from Business-Economics colleagues of increased learning and effectiveness on the part of their students as a result of participation in the Business-Foreign Language courses. Such testimony within the college has to be regarded as evidence of success, and it is hard to oppose success. At the same time we try also to keep constantly before the students the increase of proficiency and capability they possess as a result of the foreign language skills they are mastering.